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Mr. Wells as historian

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Mr. Wells as Historian

An Inquiry into those parts of
Mr. H. G. Wells' *Outline of History* which
deal with Greece and Rome

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By

A. W. Gomme

Lecturer in Greek at the University of Glasgow

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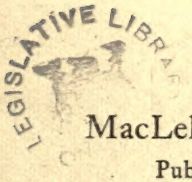

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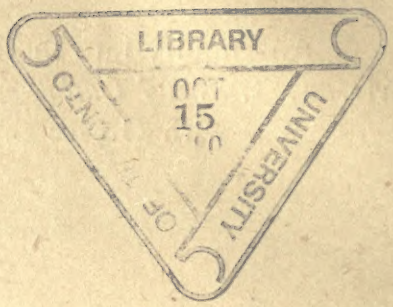

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MR. WELLS AS HISTORIAN

It was a good idea of Mr. Wells to attempt to write an Outline of History of a popular nature, to co-ordinate the vast accumulations of knowledge, and to present a story that can be easily understood by the general public. Such a work, instead of being an encyclopaedia, written by a large number of specialists, would bear the stamp of a single mind, and that, we might hope, of a well-balanced one. There was indeed reason for fear in that Mr. Wells is not an expert (as far as I know) in any one section of his history. It is true that there are dangers when an expert in one part attempts a history of the whole ; for he will probably exaggerate the importance of the part he knows best, and so destroy the proportions of the whole. But at least he will know what is the present basis of a history of former ages, how far certainty can be attained, how much to believe of the more positive statements of his colleagues, what research really is and what it imports. The non-expert, on the other hand, will always be at sea (though he may not often know it), will not know what expert to follow, nor how far, and may make the most absurd blunders by using the wrong book or misunderstanding the methods of the right one, through ignorance of the sources of opinion. Mr. Wells blunders in this way through making confident statements at random. Having read Plutarch (apparently) he comes to a hasty conclusion about the Greeks and Romans in general that is opposed to the opinion of all the experts,

and clings to it. Having read someone else he treats as certainly true some very uncertain propositions about the Mediterranean race, a question on which doubt is the only reasonable attitude; having Professor Murray as a guide, he believes that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were written by several hands (as far as his belief can be said to be as definite as that). Neither belief strikes one as the result of independent thought and inquiry: you feel, on the contrary, that had Mr. Wells had Andrew Lang or Samuel Butler as his guide, he would equally readily have held opposite opinions.

However, these defects would be scarcely worth mentioning if the author possessed the other necessary qualities for work of this kind, namely, perception, that he may see the true line of action and distinguish between the important and the trivial, and the power of expression by means of generalization and definition. The ability to generalize is indeed a danger; for false generalization is an easy thing and will deceive most readers. But without it the writer will be unable himself to see the meaning of facts, and will only lead the reader through a maze of unmeaning details. Definition is of even greater importance, to give us a true and clear picture of different periods and different peoples, to avoid vagueness and a blurred and hazy outline. None of these qualities, in my judgment, does Mr. Wells possess in sufficient measure, and it may be worth while to review what he has to say about two peoples, the ancient Greeks and Romans, about whom I have some right to form an opinion. For he has many readers, without power to judge for themselves, and they are being misled.

There are to begin with certain definite errors and some confused writing which, though not very important in themselves, yet convey the impression that sufficient care has not been taken in the writing or that the author himself was confused in his mind. For example, in his endeavour to show that the civilization of Athens was an

isolated thing in Greece (a matter to which I will return later) he says that Athens " was by far the largest of the Greek city democracies " (p. 210),[1] and " at the climax of its power had a population of perhaps a third of a million. Hardly any other Greek cities ever exceeded 50,000." (p. 182). But Thucydides tells us that Syracuse was as large as Athens in the fifth century; Sybaris, Croton, Corinth, Argos, Miletus, all probably had as big or nearly as big a population. On p. 207 we find that after the Persian wars " Greece had suddenly begun to produce literature, and put itself upon record as no other nation had done before " ; and on the next that

> " Greek history for the next forty years after Plataea and Mycale is a story of comparative peace and tranquillity. There were wars, but they were not intense wars. For a little while in Athens, for a section of the better sort, there was leisure and opportunity. And by a combination of accidents [these Mr. Wells does not further specify], and through the character of a small group of people, this leisure and opportunity produced the most remarkable and memorable results. A beautiful literature was produced ; the plastic arts flourished, and the foundations of modern science were laid."

But Homer, Mimnermus, Alcman, Sappho, Alcaeus, Stesichorus, all lived before this period and not in Athens ; they produced great literature ; while the foundations of modern science were laid by Thales, Anaximenes, Pythagoras, Zeno, Parmenides, none of them Athenians, and all earlier than Pericles. Pindar, Democritus, Polyclitus were more or less contemporary, but they were not Athenians, nor of the Periclean circle.

> " That earlier world before 600 B.C. was one in which a lonely ' stranger ' was a rare and suspected and endangered being. He might suffer horrible cruelties, for there was little law to protect such as he. Few individuals strayed therefore. One lived and died attached and tied

[1] The numbers of the pages are those of the first edition in fortnightly parts.

> to some patriarchal tribe, if one was a nomad, or to some great household if one was civilized, or to one of the big temple establishments which we will presently discuss, or one was a herded slave. One knew nothing, except for a few monstrous legends, of the rest of the world in which one lived " (p. 129).

Did one not ? Has Mr. Wells never read Homer, nor heard of the visit of Telemachus to Sparta and his reception there, or of the wanderings of Bellerophon ?

On p. 189, in the midst of the early story of Greece, is a photograph of the Olympieum at Athens with Hymettus in the background. It is called " the temple of Zeus at Olympia." Only a slip ? But such a slip makes one pause. It is corrected amongst the *errata* on the cover of Part II with the addition that " of the great Temple of Zeus at Olympia nothing remains." But a good deal of it remains : the whole of the foundations and the floor, the lowest drums of most of the columns, so that we could almost completely restore the building, and a great deal of the sculpture of the pediments and metopes ; rather more in fact than exists of the Olympieum at Athens. And still no hint that the latter building whose photograph is given belongs, as we have it, to the age of the Roman Emperor Hadrian, nearly 600 years later. Mr. Wells ought also to have been warned against the illustration of " Plato " (p. 220), which, whether it be the Indian Bacchus or not, is certainly not Plato, against the " Venus of Praxiteles " (p. 214), which is but a poor copy with some tin drapery added by a Renaissance pope, that particular copy of Myron's Discobolus (p. 213) which has a head that does not belong and is wrongly placed on the body so as to destroy the balance and the meaning of the composition, and the statue of " a Roman pugilist (gladiator)," who is a pugilist and therefore not a gladiator, and not Roman but Greek of the third or second century B.C.

Sometimes Mr. Wells has a curious way of establishing

his errors. He writes his own wrong view in the text, and allows one of his expert advisers to contradict it in a note. His account of Aristotle implies that his ideas of politics were entirely coloured by the Macedonian attempt at a world empire : " Monarchy, for instance, for all its manifest vices, was a conceivable government for millions ; it had, to a certain extent, *worked* ; it imposed a ruling will where it would seem that a collective will was impossible. This change of the general intellectual mood harmonized with Aristotle's natural respect for existing fact " (p. 221 : a curious view for one who held that a state should not have more than 10,000 citizens, less than half the size of Athens, because otherwise it could not be ruled by their collective will). " Philip, so far as we can judge, seems to have been Aristotle's ' Prince ' ; to him Aristotle turned as men turn only to those whom they admire and trust " (p. 225). But a footnote by Professor Murray says : " there is not a single sentence in praise of Alexander, no dedication, no compliments, in all Aristotle." This should puzzle the reader !

> " For the slaves and unenfranchised citizens the State did not exist ; it existed for the select body of citizens alone. It might or might not tolerate the outsider and the slave, but they had no legal voice in their treatment —any more than if it had been a despotism " (p. 181).
>
> " The Athenian democracy suffered much from that narrowness of ' patriotism ' which is the ruin of all nations. ' Athens for the Athenians ' was the guiding principle of her rule, and ' tax the foreigner ' her substitute for political wisdom " (p. 282).

Professor Murray has a note for each of these statements :

> " Cephalus, at whose house the conversation of Plato's *Republic* is placed, was a resident alien. He was a wealthy man in the best society, and taken as a type of the ' happy man.' His son, Lysias, was a leading orator ; " and " but note that Athens had (1) no taxes on foreigners and inflicted no disabilities on them except

absence of citizenship. No ' expulsions of aliens ' such as were regular at Sparta, and common in most places. This is a frequent Athenian boast. . . . (2) Practically Free Trade ; only a general 5 per cent. import duty. (3) Great interest in foreign places, constitutions, customs, etc."

He might have added that aliens, resident or not, and slaves attended the performances of tragedies and comedies which were State affairs, and other State festivals ; and have indicated what were the legal rights of the alien. Again :

" Greek democracy was, in fact, a sort of government by a swarm of hereditary barristers."

On which Mr. Ernest Barker comments :

" the Athenian dicasts were not barristers, but judges : they sat in panels (sometimes a panel of some hundreds) and judged. They had to be paid for attendances as judges (don't we pay our jurymen ?) because it took them away from their work as potters, dyers, and stone-masons."

Why did Mr. Wells retain his own sentence in the text ? Was he so proud of his epigram ? There are quite a lot of instances of this kind. Sensible men will follow the expert. But what is the ordinary reader to make of a history written in this fashion ?

Further—what is more important—there are many passages which show either carelessness in writing or confusion in the mind of the writer. In his account of the early history of Mesopotamia, the struggles between the nomads and the settled populations of the plains, Mr. Wells gives us the usual, unconsidered generalization :

" Ever and again we find some leader or some tribe amidst the disorder of free and independent nomads, powerful enough to force a sort of unity upon its kindred tribes, and then woe betide the civilization. Down pour the united nomads on the unwarlike, unarmed plains, and there ensues a war of conquest " (p. 104).

But on p. 106 the Sumerians at Nippur " maintain for many centuries their warlike capacity," on p. 108 the early Assyrians of Nineveh " develop the military art to a very high pitch." This is what Mr. Wells has to say of the Peloponnesian War :

> " Justice was fitful and law venal. Wars that were unmeaning catastrophes swept down upon any little gleam of prosperity or decency to which this or that community clambered. Athens, prospering for a time after the Persian repulse, was smitten by the plague, in which Pericles, its greatest ruler, died (428 B.C.) " (p. 215).

This follows immediately on a rhetorical account of the decline of Persia after the struggle with Greece ; and it is not clear exactly where law was venal and wars unmeaning ; nor what is the connection between fitful justice and the great plague. But let that pass. On the same page, but at the beginning of a new chapter, we read :

> " After an interval of fifty odd years, the long-smouldering hostility between Athens and Sparta [we have been told nothing about this hostility before, nor what sort of place Sparta was, and why hostile to Athens] broke out into a fierce and exhausting war . . . known in history as the Peloponnesian War ; it went on for nearly thirty years, and wasted all the power of Greece. At first Athens was in the ascendant, then Sparta. Then arose Thebes, a city not fifty miles from Athens, to overshadow Sparta. Once more Athens flared into importance as the head of a confederation. The story must be told at considerable length or not at all."

On p. 215 we have a reference to Alcibiades : " who did much to lead Athens into the disastrous expedition against Syracuse which destroyed her strength." Rather, perhaps, the story should be told clearly or not at all. What is the connection between the plague, the death of Pericles, or the Syracusan expedition, and the Peloponnesian War ? Did Thebes arise and Athens flare into importance once more during or after the war ?

Some of the illustrations are queerly chosen too. " This is a photograph of a model restoration of Solomon's temple. It is a very exaggerated and glorified restoration. The only justifiable thing in it is the central temple. All the splendid galleries round it are *imaginary*. The true walls were probably rough piled stone " (p. 166). Why, then, does he give it (in the same way he gives on p. 235 a reproduction of the *Defeat of Darius* by Pietro de Cortona to show what the battle of Arbela was not like) ? There is a photograph of the Victory of Samothrace " carved to commemorate a victory gained by Demetrius Poliorcetes over the Egyptian (*sic*) General Ptolemy, 306 B.C., off the island of Cyprus " (p. 238), a picture of Samnite warriors and a map of the Roman Power after the Samnite wars (pp. 278 and 288), a photograph of the Servian Wall of Rome (p. 279) ; but there is no mention in the text of Demetrius, nor of the Samnites and their wars, nor of Servius. For all the reader may know, the wall might have been built by the Serbs. Similarly, on p. 311, where Mr. Wells is telling the story of the last years of the Republic, he puts in a photograph of one corner of the forum, with " the Column of Phocas, the Tabularium, and the Arch of Septimius Severus." When did Phocas live ? What is a tabularium ? Where is Baalbek, too, and when was the Colosseum built ? of which we are given photographs and no word of explanation. Clarity of exposition is of the first importance in a short and popular history.

Equally confusing to the unwary is this : Mr. Wells has two chapters (24 and 25) headed " the Career of Alexander the Great " and " Science and Religion at Alexandria," and before this he has several references to a pre-Alexandrian time.

> " For four thousand years this new thing, civilization, which had set its root into the soil of the two rivers, grew as a tree grows ; now losing a limb, now stripped by a storm, but always growing or resuming its growth. After

> four thousand years the warriors and conquerors were still going to and fro over this growing thing they did not understand, but men had now (330 B.C.) got iron, horses, writing and computation, money, a greater variety of food and textiles, a wider knowledge of the world" (pp. 111-2);

and he refers to this period as that between Sargon I. and Alexander.

Again:

> "When one realises the absence of small money or of any conveniently portable means of exchange in the pre-Alexandrian world, one perceives how impossible was private travel in those days" (p. 129: note by Professor Gardner that small change was in existence before the time of Alexander; and immediately after Mr. Wells himself says that private travellers must have been fairly common in the Greek world as early as the beginning of the fifth century).

So in the chapter on Science and Religion at Alexandria we read:

> "The Museum Ptolemy set up was in effect the first university in the world. As its name implies, it was dedicated to the service of the Muses, which was also the case with the Peripatetic School at Athens. It was, however, a religious body only in form, in order to meet the legal difficulties of endowment in a world that had never foreseen such a thing as a secular intellectual process."

But three centuries of secular intellectual process had already preceded Alexandria! At least four universities, in the sense in which Mr. Wells uses the word (*colleges* would perhaps be better), had been started by Pythagoras in Italy, Plato and Aristotle at Athens, Eudoxus at Cyzicus. Mr. Wells himself has devoted a chapter to this earlier (and better) work. It would almost seem as though originally Mr. Wells had gone straight on from Judea to Alexander, when some friend warned him that

a word or two should be given to the classical period of Greece. But will not the ignorant reader suppose from all this that the Alexandrian age was the first age of enlightenment, that only dark ages preceded it ?

There is the same sort of vagueness in his use of the phrase " the ancient world."

> " We find that one of the most conspicuous objects in every city [in Egypt and Mesopotamia] is a temple or group of temples. . . . This presence of the temple is equally true of the Phoenician cities and of the Greek and Roman as they arose. . . . All over the ancient civilized world we find them " (p. 136).

But the next section begins :

> " In all these temples there was a shrine ; dominating the shrine there was commonly a great figure usually of some monstrous half-animal form, before which stood an altar for sacrifice."

This is not true of Greece or Rome, where half-animal deities were of the extremest rarity. Again on p. 134 Mr. Wells writes :

> " All that remains to us of the ancient world, its rocks, its buildings, is plastered thickly with the names and the boasting of those foremost among human advertisers, its kings."

This also is not true of Greece nor of Rome ; indeed the presence of such royal boasting in the East and its absence in the West is one of the essential differences between Asiatic and European civilization ; but Mr. Wells ignores the difference and confuses the reader.

His treatment of Homer is particularly illuminating as to his method (not as to Homer). Book III. of the whole work, *The Dawn of History*, opens with Chapter 15, " The Aryan-speaking Peoples in Prehistoric Times " ; this is followed by five chapters on Mesopotamia and Egypt, Crete and the Phoenicians, the invention of

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writing, religion, social conditions, etc., ending with the words :

> " in these last six chapters we have traced the process by which, in the course of 5000 or 6000 years, mankind passed from the stage of early neolithic husbandry to the days of the 4th century B.C."

Book IV., *Judea, Greece and India,* then begins with a first chapter on " Hebrew Scriptures and the Prophets," and then two on Greece. Where do you expect to find Homer ? You do find him, not in the account of Greece, but among the prehistoric Aryans, at the beginning of the account of the 5000 or 6000 years. It is not that Mr. Wells takes some of the material of Homer and shows it to be comparable with other evidence of early Aryan life. The whole of his account of the epic is here. This is it. Homer is of Nordic race—this ugly word does not seem to mean anything other than " Northern," unless perhaps it should be applied to people who live in the south but have those virtues of fairness, tallness, love of truth, courage, a frank and brave religion, which must be confined to northerners or certain well-known theories would fall. (Southerners have " ideas of self-abasement, self-mutilation, and the like, that are altogether foreign to the healthy directness of the hardy barbarians of the north " (p. 218) ; their gods " lurked beneath the gods of the conquering freemen, and found their furtive followers among slaves and women " (p. 181) ; " this dark strain was subtle, artistic, creative—Cnossos witnesses to that ; but it had no great courage of the mind ; it was afraid of the stars and of life " (p. 217-8) ;

> " beneath the fine and restrained Nordic religion of the Greeks the land abounded with religious cults of a darker and more ancient kind, aboriginal cults with secret initiations, orgiastic celebrations, and often with cruel and obscene rites " (p. 229).

This foolish idea informs all Mr. Wells' account of

the Aryan and Mediterranean races.) But to return to Homer :

> " One of the most interesting and informing of these prehistoric compositions of the Aryans survives in the Greek *Iliad*. An early form of the *Iliad* was probably recited by 1000 B.C., but it was not written down until perhaps 700 or 600 B.C. Many men must have had to do with it as authors and improvers, but later Greek tradition ascribed it to a blind bard named Homer, to whom also is ascribed the *Odyssey*, a composition of a very different spirit and outlook. To be a bard was naturally a blind man's occupation. The Slavs called all bards *sliepac*, which was also their word for a blind man. The original recited version of the *Iliad* was older than that of the *Odyssey*. . . . Both Epics were probably written over and rewritten by some poet of a later date, in much the same manner that Lord Tennyson, the poet laureate of Queen Victoria, in his *Idylls of the King*, wrote over the *Morte d'Arthur* . . . making the speeches and sentiments and the characters more in accordance with those of his own time. But the events of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the way of living they describe, the spirit of the acts recorded, belong to the closing centuries of the prehistoric age " (p. 98).

To this must be added the following remarkable sentence :

> " the age of Augustus was an age of imitative literature. Virgil in the *Aeneid* set himself, modestly but resolutely, and with an elegant sort of successfulness, to parallel Homer, just as Lord Tennyson, the poet laureate of Queen Victoria, using the mediaeval literature about King Arthur as his material, did a similar service for Great Britain in his *Idylls of the King* " (p. 331).

That is all, and was there ever such nonsense ? Now we know the source of inspiration in the greatest of epic poets. He was blind, and it was his occupation. But Hesiod was not blind, nor Arctinus, nor Lesches, nor Panyassis. The Greeks believed that Homer was blind because they thought he said so himself in a well-known

line ; and, as Mr. Barker says, his language often suggests that the belief is true. Homer had previous material to write about, and " worked it up," much as Tennyson did his and Virgil his (since Virgil too is like Tennyson). In this aspect the *Iliad* is analogous to the *Aeneid* and the *Idylls*, and belongs apparently to about 700 to 600 B.C. (contemporary with Sappho and Archilochus—" the speeches and sentiments and the characters are in accordance with his own time " ; but Mr. Wells ignores the lyric poetry of Greece, so probably is unconscious of the difficulty of this view) ; though the text was only put in order a hundred years later (p. 217). Then why talk of " authors " and " improvers " ? You do not speak of " authors " of the *Aeneid* or " improvers " of the *Idylls*. Neither does one speak of the *Aeneid* and the *Idylls* as " interesting and informing prehistoric compositions." Why does not Mr. Wells give his account of Virgil together with that of Homer ? If Homer was a Tennyson of the seventh or sixth century, it becomes all the stranger that he should be treated as a bard of prehistoric Aryans. The account is accompanied by an illustration of the bust of Homer which is an excellent work of the third century and belongs entirely in spirit to that age, and has no place here. He is there called " the personified blind bard of the Hellenic peoples." What is a " personified bard " ? I can understand a personification of an abstract idea, courage or epic poetry, but how do you personify a person ? Meanwhile no word of the poetic merit of the poems, nothing of Homer's place in literature, of the light he throws on Greek thought, of the kind of poetry he wrote. A German scholar recently pronounced that Homer was " a poet with a considerable talent for composition." Mr. Wells improves on this, and the immortal bard is now only the personified author of " one of the most interesting and informing of the prehistoric compositions of the Aryans." *One of, interesting, informing, prehistoric, composition, Aryan.*

Every word is delightful; except that I should like to substitute *Nordic*,[1] or even *Germanic*, for Aryan. It would be interesting to see the answer of a man who knew nothing of Greece but what he had learned from this *Outline*, to the question "What do you know of Homer?" If he were asked what he knew of Greek lyric poetry, he would write "nothing"; on the whole, a more satisfactory answer.

A further study of Mr. Wells' account of the Greeks does not bring more confidence. Take his description of Greek democracy:

> "As the modern world nowadays is constantly talking of democracy, and as the modern idea of democracy is something widely different from the democracy of the Greek city states, it will be well to be very explicit upon the meaning of democracy in Greece. Democracy then was government by the commonalty, the Demos; it was government by the whole body of the citizens, by the many as distinguished from the few. But let the modern reader mark that word 'citizen.' The slave was excluded, the freedman was excluded, the stranger; even the Greek born in the city, whose father had come eight or ten miles from the city beyond the headland was excluded. . . . Thus, in the Greek democracies quite as much as in the oligarchies, the citizens formed *a close corporation*, ruling sometimes, as in the case of Athens in its great days, a big population of serfs, slaves, and 'outlanders.' [Who were the serfs?] A modern politician used to the idea, the entirely new and different idea, that democracy in its perfected form means that every adult man and woman shall have a voice in the government, would, if suddenly spirited back to the extremest Greek democracy, regard it as a kind of oligarchy" (pp. 183-4).

This is followed by the passage already quoted about Greek democracy being "government by a swarm of hereditary barristers"; and the reason given why the

[1] Mr. Wells takes the Venus of Praxiteles as a type of the Nordic race by a Nordic artist (p. 86).

patriotism of the Greeks was so intense and so narrow, why no city would ever coalesce with another, is that " that would have obliterated every advantage by which the citizens lived. There would have been no more fees, no more privileges." Does Mr. Wells really imagine that the fees of the dicasts came from the defence or prosecution of foreigners, resident aliens, or slaves? That is the impression he gives.

> " Another difference from modern conditions, due to the small size of the Greek city states, was that in a democracy every citizen had the right to attend and speak and vote in the popular assembly. . . . Nothing of this sort is possible in a modern ' democracy ' with, perhaps, several million voters. . . . In the later Greek democracies the appointment of public officials, except in the case of officers requiring very special knowledge, was by casting lots. This was supposed to protect the general corporation of privileged citizens from the continued predominance of rich, influential, and conspicuously able men."

Let us examine these two paragraphs. What is the meaning of the sentence " democracy now means that every adult man and woman shall have a voice in the government " ? Every adult man and woman where? In the world? No, living within the boundaries of the state. But what about the foreign visitor, or the resident but unnaturalized alien? He is ruled, but has no voice in the ruling, because he is not a citizen; for the same reason that aliens at Athens had no voice in the government. Were the indentured Chinese labourers in the Transvaal given votes? Of course not. Neither were Greek slaves, who, be it remembered, in nearly every Greek state except Sparta, were foreigners imported, though not in great gangs like the Chinese in the Transvaal. In Athens they were never Greeks. The presence of slavery in the ancient world marks a fundamental difference between those times and ours, but it is a moral and economic difference, not one in the theory of

citizenship. Similarly, England admits, or did admit, any foreigner to citizenship after a residence of five years (was it not?); the Greeks had no such idea. They thought that if "Athens" had a significance other than "Corinth" or "Sparta," it was foolish to pretend that any Corinthian or Spartan, by merely residing in Athens for a time, could become an Athenian, and that it would only be breaking up the unity of a state to admit foreigners as citizens. Still more would it be foolish to admit Persians to Greek citizenship, if "Greece" and "Persia" mean distinct things, not because Persians are inferior to Greeks, but because they are different, and the difference is greater between a Greek and a Persian than between an Athenian and a Spartan. A state, they said, should consist of similar, not dissimilar, elements. It should also be quite small, so that the citizens may know each other; see Mr. Wells' quotation from Aristotle in the note to p. 223. They may, or may not, be wrong in their view; and Mr. Wells is entitled, if he likes, to express his opinion that they are wrong, and quote so remarkable an instance as the United States to prove that a state can be made up of heterogeneous elements and yet remain a unity. But we do not want, in an historian, idle talk about "fee-hunting citizens," "tax the foreigner," and "Athens for the Athenians," but an explanation of the difference between Greek and modern ideas. If Mr. Wells wants a sympathetic account of the extreme nationalist and protectionist view by a writer whom he will not suspect of "reactionary" or "narrow-minded" views, let him read Mr. Lowes Dickinson's *Letters of John Chinaman.*

I do not know whether a modern politician would regard Athenian democracy as a kind of oligarchy; he would probably be equally shocked and nervous at the thought that the people really possessed the power to control him and bring him to book. But I am certain that any Greek would regard a modern democracy as a

rather extreme form of oligarchy ; and that not because in fact the voters have very little choice of candidates and no control over a parliament once it is elected, and still less over the bureaucracy—this he would regard simply as a usual accompaniment of oligarchy—but because it is a council of a few who do the ruling, and " oligarchy " means " rule by the few." To describe democracy as " rule in the interest of the governed and by the consent and choice of the governed," would have been meaningless to a Greek, for whom democracy meant quite literally " government *by* the people " so that there did not exist a class of " the governed." That is why, while the whole people elected annually the generals and such-like important people, lot was instituted for the minor offices, with the proviso that no one should hold office more than once—not to protect the mass of citizens from the " predominance of rich, influential, and conspicuously able men," for no such men would have been ambitious to shine in the minor offices of the very unimportant bureaucracies of Greek cities ; but so that every citizen should take his share in the actual work of governing, and know what government meant.

Consider the constitution of Sparta. There the citizens met in assembly to decide certain important questions ; war, for instance, could not be declared nor peace concluded without the consent of the body of citizens. In addition they elected yearly the " ephors," to check the actions of the kings and others given great powers, and these ephors gradually became the men who generally directed the state. Such a constitution in a modern state (with the substitution of referendum for assembly) would be regarded as an extreme form of democracy. But the Greeks regarded it as an oligarchy ; rightly, for in fact the ephors, the few, ruled—generally with the consent of the citizens indeed, but they managed affairs. Since oligarchy and democracy are Greek ideas, and political ideas form a not unimportant element in the thought

of the Greeks, all this should have been explained by the historian. There is plenty that Mr. Wells might cut out to make room for it.

Again, if you mention the wars of the Greeks among themselves at all, you must give some explanation of them, not dismiss them with the words: "It is a story of narrow rivalries and inexplicable hatreds, that would have vanished long ago out of the memories of men, were it not that it is recorded and reflected in a great literature" (p. 208); and "planless and murderous squabbles are still planless and murderous squabbles even though Thucydides tells the story." The wars are not planless, nor inexplicable—if you understand Thucydides. Take the Peloponnesian War, the one whose story is told by Thucydides. The whole political tradition of Greece for many hundred years had centred in the separate independence of each city. Athens violated this tradition by her empire over other cities. That is why Sparta had most of Greece behind her in the struggle. That is not the whole story. In this, as in other wars, you find in addition cruelty, selfishness, unjust ambitions public and private, the exploitation of genuine and right feeling by the powerful. But the tradition of independence is the kernel of the matter; and has a parallel in the national traditions of modern Europe which will make men resist the overpowering might of a single country. You may certainly hold that these struggles destroyed Greece, that it would have been better had the country been united under Athens; but what the reader needs is an explanation why men resisted this and went to war about it. Because you are unable to explain this yourself is no reason for dismissing it as inexplicable. After all, Greek civilization declined in quality after the absorption of the free and independent cities into the Macedonian monarchies, and the world was (and is) the loser thereby. Perhaps the instincts of Demosthenes and Aristotle in preferring a small state like Athens to the empire of

Alexander was a sound one, though Mr. Wells sees in it nothing but an obsession which was a barrier to the development of Greek thought.

Mr. Wells will have it that such culture as the Greeks possessed was confined to a very small circle, to a short period of time in the fifth century, and, practically, to Athens. He cannot mean merely that in Greece the number of well-educated men was smaller than that of the badly educated, or that the great men, the creators, the artists and philosophers, were few in number. Because that is true of all ages and needs no emphasis. He must mean—and certainly all his readers will take him to mean—that there were fewer cultured people in proportion to the whole population than in a modern state,[1] and that these formed a close and restricted circle.

> " For a little while in Athens, for a section of the better sort, there was leisure and opportunity . . . which produced remarkable results " (above, p. 5).
>
> " The literature that Athens produced during such patches and gleams of tranquillity and security as these times afforded her " (p. 210 ;—let Mr. Wells compare the dates of the work of Sophocles, Euripides, Agathon, Aristophanes, Socrates, Thucydides, the sculptor Alcamenes and the painter Apollodorus—all Athenians—with the dates of one war only, the Peloponnesian War, and then let him consider what the intervals of tranquillity and security had to do with it).
>
> " This remarkable outbreak of creative power . . . flared up after the battles of Marathon and Salamis had made Athens free and fearless, predominate in her world. It was the work of a quite small group of men."
>
> " The salient facts of this brief summary will serve to show how discordant Pericles was with the normal life of his time and city. This intellectual and artistic outbreak in Athens was no doubt favoured by the

[1] " The startling advance civilization has made in the past hundred or so years . . . is the work of a mere handful of men. The mass probably are little more scientific than they were two thousand years ago."—Professor Soddy, *Science and Life*, p. 86.

> conditions of the time, but it was also due in part to the appearance of some very unusual men. It was not a general movement; it was the movement of a small group of people exceptionally placed and gifted" (pp. 214-5).

But it is untrue that this intellectual activity of Greece was due to a sudden outburst or began in the age of Pericles or was confined to Athens (nor did it end with the fifth century—Plato, Aristotle, Demosthenes, Praxiteles, Lysippus are of the fourth); and Mr. Wells offers no proof that "Pericles was discordant with the normal life of his time and city." His facts are not facts. To take the first point—Greek art, philosophy, science and literature were flourishing long before Pericles and in many cities besides Athens; philosophy and science in the sixth and most of the fifth centuries were almost confined to Greek Asia Minor and Greek Italy; painting and sculpture were as prominent in the Peloponnese, poetry in Boeotia and the islands of the Aegean, as in Athens. Indeed Athens produced only two philosophers before the end of the fourth century, Socrates and Plato; and only three notable foreigners settled there, Anaxagoras, Aristotle and Theophrastus. Of scientists—using that term of men who specialized in mathematics, astronomy, biology, etc.—Athens produced two only, Theaetetus and Speusippus, both of the fourth century, against very many others who were born and worked elsewhere. There was constant communication between such men, they knew each other's work, they had controversies, they travelled to meet one another. There was no exclusive Athenian circle.

As to the quality of the average Athenian—or Greek, as we should rather say—it is a somewhat barren question, and impossible to decide. Mr. Wells allows Professor Murray space in which to contradict his own views, but it would have been better to allow him to cut out all "the salient facts" in the account of Pericles' life. This

includes a very long description of all the attacks on Pericles and his friends; though he does not say that these attacks were not successful till Attica was invaded by an enemy, the country population driven within the walls, the plague was at its height, and the people in despair. But throughout the many previous years of his administration Pericles seems to have been in complete accord with his surroundings; we hear nothing of the kind of conflict that Mr. Wells suggests. Even in relating these attacks Mr. Wells makes statements for which there is no evidence.

> "The sturdy self-respect of the common voters revolted presently against the beautiful buildings rising about them; against the favours shown to such sculptors as Phidias over popular worthies in the same line of business; against the donations made to a mere foreigner like Herodotus of Halicarnassus; against the insulting preference for the company and conversation of a Milesian woman. The public life of Pericles was conspicuously orderly, and that presently set the man in the street thinking that his private life must be very corrupt." (Mr. Wells immediately after quotes from Plutarch the statement that this orderliness of Pericles' demeanour in public "excited admiration in all that saw him.") "As the memories of Plataea and Salamis faded and the new buildings grew familiar, Pericles and the pride of Athens became more and more offensive to the homely humour of the crowd."

What had Pericles to do with Salamis? He wept in defending Aspasia—"a gleeful thing for the rabble. His tears saved Aspasia for a time." Yet the judges who were affected by his tears were this very rabble; and Aspasia lived on in Athens in tranquillity after Pericles' death. All this is invention, nothing else.

We know a little about the average Athenian. We know that crowds gathered to listen to Gorgias, the strange orator from Sicily with his new kind of prose; that the sophists, Protagoras, Prodicus, Hippias—none of

them Athenians by the way—went from town to town, attracting great numbers everywhere to their classes, and grew rich on culture; that Socrates was known and respected by soldiers and statesmen like Laches and Nicias outside the circle of scientific inquiry; that tragedies—not at all of the popular kind as we understand "popular"—were performed before audiences which must have numbered about one-sixth to one-tenth of the Greek-speaking population of Athens, a much larger proportion of the whole than is appealed to by good literature in England to-day; that the greatest of the tragedians were also the most popular; and that the comedies of Aristophanes imply in his equally large audiences a fairly intimate knowledge of the tragedies. This is not conclusive; no evidence in a question of this kind can be. But it means something, and should be considered by the historian.

Even so, untrue, irrelevant, useless and out of proportion as this crabbing of the Athenians is, it would not matter so much if the account of the achievements of the gifted few were in any respect adequate. It would distort the picture, it would help to obscure the truth; but the truth would remain if Mr. Wells had understood Greek thought and been able to give a clear account of it. But—Mr. Wells has polite phrases about the "outbreak of creative power which for three and twenty centuries has been to men of intelligence a guiding and inspiring beacon out of the past," and the like; but he has no understanding, none at all. This is the most important part of the history of Greece, and must be treated with some fullness. Mr. Wells has a chapter on "Greek Thought and Literature." It is divided into sections as follows: (1) *The Athens of Pericles* (pp. 208-214). This deals almost entirely with the greatness of Pericles and the smallness of the average Athenian, and has already been discussed. It scarcely touches on Greek achievement except for such sentences as "a beautiful

literature was produced; the plastic arts flourished; and the foundations of modern science were laid"; "what does not shrink into insignificance is the literature that Athens produced" (see above, p. 21); "the Parthenon of Athens, whose ruins are still a thing of beauty [this is like the German on Homer], was but the crown set upon the clustering beauty of the Athens Pericles rebuilt. Such sculptures as those of Phidias, Myron, and Polyclitus that still survive, witness to the artistic quality of the time." Myron and Polyclitus had nothing to do with the beautification of Athens under Pericles, but no matter. (2) *Socrates* (p. 215). A little introductory matter, and then:

> "his method was profoundly sceptical; he believed that the only possible virtue was true knowledge; he would tolerate no belief, no hope that could not pass the ultimate acid test. For himself this meant virtue, but for many of his weaker followers it meant the loss of beliefs and moral habits that would have restrained their impulses."

Then follows a short account of his associates, good and bad, of his prosecution and death. (3) *What was the quality of the common Athenian?* (pp. 216-7). This section consists of Professor Murray's reply to Mr. Wells about the average Athenian. (4) *Greek Tragedy and Comedy* (pp. 227-8). "Before the age of Pericles the main literature of the Greek peoples had been their epic poetry (which was Aryan). . . . In addition, there were also poems of a more homely character, love songs, war lyrics, and the like." (Perhaps this is the account of Sappho, Alcaeus, etc., for which I have been searching?) This is followed by an unnecessary, and quite improbable, account of the pre-Aryan strain in Athens, "dark, subtle, artistic, creative" (see above, p. 13), which led to the development of tragedy and comedy. "Here we can but name those who were supreme in these arts who flourished in the days of Pericles, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and

Euripides, the masters of tragedy, and Aristophanes, the writer of comedies. We can say nothing of the splendour and beauty of the former, nor of the fantastic invention and wit of the latter." So that is that. (5) *Plato and the Academy* (pp. 219-20). Socrates, " at whose touch faith, speculation, and illusion shrivelled together " (a remarkable verdict), was the centre of a group of young men, of whom Plato was the greatest. In mental temperament he

> " was of an altogether different type from the older man. He was a most artistic and delicate writer, and Socrates could write nothing consecutive. He cared for beautiful things and Socrates despised them. He was supremely concerned with the ordering of public affairs and the scheming of happier human relationships."

We have a brief account of the *Republic* and the *Laws*, and then :

> " there is much in Plato at which we cannot even glance here, but it is a landmark in this history, it is a new thing in the development of mankind, this appearance of the idea of wilfully and completely recasting human conditions."

Then follow a few sentences about Isocrates, " one of the wisest of Greek political thinkers " (he is the only Greek writer of the classical period who is a bore), and Xenophon. (6) *Aristotle and the Lyceum* (pp. 220-1). This section is more or less true and to the point, except for the mistake about the importance of the Macedonian monarchy to Aristotle, and such statements as that about the scientific workers of that time being only " collectors of stories rather than observers " of natural facts. (7) *Philosophy becomes Unworldly* (p. 221). The Cynics, Stoics and Epicureans. Lastly, (8) *The Quality and Limitations of Greek Thought* (pp. 222-4). This section is occupied entirely by a consideration of the limitations of Greek thought, not at all of its quality. Three barriers were set about the Greek mind from which it rarely

escapes; the first was its obsession by the idea of the city as the ultimate state; the second was slavery; the third was "a want of knowledge that is almost inconceivable to us to-day." That is all; no mention of painting, or mathematics which the Greeks founded, or medicine which also they founded as a science and first distinguished from herb-lore. But before I discuss this chapter, there is a sentence at the beginning of this last section which I cannot pass by.

> "There is a disposition to exaggeration in all human admiration; men will treat the rough notes of Thucydides or Plato for work they never put in order as miracles of style, and the errors of their transcribers as hints of unfathomable mysteries; most of our classical texts are very much mangled."

I rub my eyes, and read this again, and ponder on its meaning. Have the rough notes of Thucydides and Plato been recently discovered? Has a new race of scholars arisen, who will not emend a manuscript, but sit in awe before unfathomable mysteries? I had always thought that scholars were a little positive about errors in manuscripts, not only that they are errors, but how they can be restored. And the mangling of our texts? The plays of Menander, the poems of Sappho are mangled, because we only have them in fragments. But to what extent does Mr. Wells imagine that we are shut off, not only from the meaning, but the very style and words of Plato, by errors in our texts?

Let the reader note the proportion of space given to Pericles (largely occupied with a consideration of his personal character) and the common Athenian, and that given to the more important subject of Greek thought: seven and a half pages to the former, eight and a half to the latter, of which three are occupied by the limitations. In the five and a half pages left we have a false account of Socrates, an inadequate account of Plato, a short one of Aristotle, and the bare mention by name of the three

Attic tragedians, the chief comic poet, three sculptors, and a famous temple. This is to suffice the reader for a description of all that the Greeks achieved, their creation of a marvellous language which is the best instrument yet known for the expression of human thought, their epic, lyric and dramatic poetry, their history, their oratory, their philosophy, science, mathematics, their political theories and their institutions,[1] their architecture, their painting and their sculpture; in all of which they produced work which is of the greatest in human history; not to mention their wit and humour, their manufacture and commerce, their everyday life and ideas of conduct, their voyaging and geographical discovery. The reader wants some account of those achievements, and above all some description of the common quality which can be observed in all that the Greeks did and thought, a quality which marks them off and separates them from other peoples.

I have said that Mr. Wells' account of Plato is inadequate. For Plato was not supremely concerned with the ordering of public affairs and the scheming of human relationships, but with the theory of knowledge, of being, and of the good, philosophical questions. Did not Mr. Wells notice in the *Republic* certain passages about "dialectic," and the relative values of certain kinds of study, natural science, mathematics, astronomy without the stars, and so forth? That is it. If he thinks the discussion of the ideal state more important to Plato, let him try other dialogues, the *Philebus* or the *Parmenides*, or simply read Professor Burnet's *Greek Philosophy*, or Milhaud's *Philosophes-géomètres de la Grèce*, and he will

[1] In speaking of the new things introduced by Rome into the world's history, Mr. Wells writes: "We get in the Senate and the popular assembly a conflict of groups and personalities, an argumentative process of control, far more stable and enduring than any autocracy can be, far more flexible and adaptable than any priesthood." If the Greeks did not invent, perfect, and live by "an argumentative process of control," who did?

learn something both of what Greeks thought about and how they thought. This is fundamental. Throughout his chapter on Greek thought, Mr. Wells never once mentions logic and only once mathematics—perhaps the two greatest triumphs of the Greek mind.[1] They invented both and they achieved much in both, and it was entirely characteristic of their minds that they did. If a man can really understand what is meant by saying that logic and mathematics were the supreme and characteristic achievements of the Greeks, he will have the key not only to their philosophy and their science, but also to the peculiar quality of their art and their literature. For the special mark of these two sciences is that they are examples at once of a vigorous exactness of reasoning—with well-defined boundaries and no vague straying beyond them—and of the free and creative activity of thought. At the same time their conclusions are of universal application, permanent and immutable, not changing with time and place; and so are examples of absolute truth. Absolute truth was what the Greeks looked for; which is why there are no sceptics

[1] Mr. Wells' one mention of mathematics is typical: "Greek thought was hampered by a want of knowledge that is almost inconceivable to us to-day. . . . The forty-seventh proposition of the first book of Euclid was regarded as one of the supreme triumphs of the human mind." It wasn't, really. It was regarded as a very important achievement, because by it was discovered, by Pythagoras, quite early in the fifth century, the existence of incommensurable numbers. For when the two sides of the triangle containing the right angle are equal to one another, each, say, one unit long, the length of the third side will be the square root of 2, and the value of this cannot be exactly determined. Or in other words the side and diagonal of a square are not commensurable one with the other. This discovery of incommensurable numbers marks, I believe, one of the most important stages in the growth of mathematics.

Mr. Wells is evidently ignorant of the true development of Greek mathematics. On p. 249 he mentions Euclid as a name that stands out among a scientific constellation (at Alexandria) "such as even Athens at its best could not rival." But most of the matter of the *Elements* had already been worked out in the fifth century by the Pythagoreans and Hippocrates of Chios, and the rest in the fourth by Theaetetus and Eudoxus, associates of Plato. It was another pupil of Plato, Menaechmus, who discovered the new curves of conics.

to be found among Greek philosophers, with the possible exception of Heraclitus, and hardly any among all Greek writers—Protagoras being a notable exception. (How Mr. Wells can say in the same sentence that Socrates was a sceptic and that his test was knowledge, I cannot imagine; for a sceptic is a man who denies the possibility of knowledge.) So at the very beginnings of their scientific enquiry the Greeks were searching for that unity behind the apparent multiplicity of the world, those unchanging entities, which it is still the object of science to discover. So in ethics and aesthetics they looked for an absolute good and absolute beauty, unchanging standards by which things of this world are to be measured. They searched for a definition, a limit, beyond which if a thing strays it ceases to be good or beautiful. It is this which added stability to the creative freedom of their thought; and gave stability too to their art and that well-balanced proportion which, with purity of outline, and an exclusion of all that is extravagant, restless or irrelevant, is its chief and undying merit. They praised the right mean between extravagant extremes, and, of virtues and vices, emphasized the vice of arrogant boastfulness (*hubris*) which led kings like Xerxes to assume the attributes and lay claim to the qualities that belong only to the gods, and the virtue of self-control (*sophrosyné*) which kept a man within the limits of good conduct. So with their language.

> "Greek, in my experience, is easier to write than English," said Headlam, speaking of translation from one language into the other; "you have only to speak simply, with the words in the right places and due care for logic and for rhythm, and the language then seems somehow to put on a charm and beauty of its own. It is more than any quality of neatness merely—what is terse and definite and lucid and concise; it is complete harmonious grace and unsuperfluous adequacy, the knit strength and quiet beauty of an athlete. But translate it literally, and the charm is apt to vanish like a perfume

that escapes,—to English taste especially, because the tendency of English is to be redundant and diffuse, to load with ornament and colour, and to overcloud with varied and obscuring imagery. A translator, therefore, has a strong temptation to embellish what he fears may seem too flat and bald. But that should be resisted. As in sculpture, so in poetry, the characteristic of Greek Art was its melodious outline, and it is a grave artistic sin to falsify so cardinal a feature."

If Mr. Wells had quoted some such passage as that, and shown how these same qualities of simplicity, exactness, and melodious outline can be traced in all that the Greeks achieved, he would have given us some sort of picture of Greece that the mind could have grasped.

But, after all, one could hardly have expected him to have understood Greece. Only a man with no sense of a *limit* could have tolerated his coloured reproduction of the Parthenon, with the displacements due to earthquake all emphasized, with its thick, worried and undecided outline, and have thought it a satisfactory picture of Greek work. Mr. Wells has a mind the opposite of the Greek, creative and imaginative indeed, but vague and unscientific, with a feeling only for an indefinite largeness, not for shape. "The story is, on the whole, one of enlargement" (p. 110) is a typical sentence. Hence he can write like this:

> "The historians have seen fit to fabricate a quite impossible last dying speech for him. Probably he said very little. . . .
>
> When, a little after sunrise, Alexander came up, Darius was already dead. . . .
>
> To the historian of the world the wanderings of Alexander have an interest of their own," etc. (p. 239);

or this:

> "The Egyptian priests had mapped out the stars into the constellations, and divided up the zodiac into twelve signs by 3000 B.C. . . .
>
> § 4.
>
> This clear evidence of astronomical enquiry," etc. (p. 141)

where the dots do not mean that I have left anything out, but are part of Mr. Wells' style.

This is different from the Greek idea of a sentence. Style, said Aristotle, is either continuous or compact; " par continu j'entends donc une phrase ou une idée qui n'a pas de fin par elle-même, et qui ne s'arrête qu'avec le sujet même qu'on expose. Ce style est désagréable, comme tout ce qui est sans fin ; car on aime voir une fin en tout ce qu'on fait. . . . Ce qui constitue le style condensé, ce sont les périodes ; et par période, j'entends une phrase qui a par elle-même un commencement et une fin, et qui est d'une dimension facile à embrasser " [1] (using here the same word, *eusunopton*, which he applies to the proper size of a state—see above, p. 18). Clearly Aristotle had not contemplated the possibility of a Mr. Wells.

Not shape, but size interests Mr. Wells :

> " Upon a one-foot globe Greece becomes a speck almost too small to recognize, and in a short history of mankind, all this century and more of dissension between the days of Salamis and Plataea and the rise of King Philip, shrinks to a little, almost inaudible clash of disputation, to a mere note upon the swift passing of opportunity for nations as for men " (p. 210).
>
> " By the scale of a world history the Roman Empire ceases to seem so overwhelmingly important. . . . During its four centuries of life the empire of Rome had phases of division and complete chaos ; its prosperous years, if they are gathered together and added up, do not amount in all to a couple of centuries. Compared with the quiet steady expansion, the security, and the civilizing task of the contemporary Chinese Empire, or with Egypt between 4000 and 1000 B.C., or with Sumeria before the Semitic Conquest, this amounts to a mere incident in history " (p. 325).

One wonders why Mr. Wells gives so much space to so unimportant a people, and so little to China and Egypt.

[1] *Rhetoric*, Bk. III., trans. St. Hilaire.

Hence it is that his account of the civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia is also disappointing. It has no form. For example, the first thing that a man would note, who had only been through a representative gallery of Egyptian sculpture, is the way in which Egyptian art maintained itself for over 3000 years with so little variety in conception and technique, and with so high a standard of achievement—a thing not paralleled in any other people known to us, not even, I believe, in China. But Mr. Wells makes no mention of this, the peculiar quality of Egypt. Nor does he make clear those elements of all the civilizations of Western Asia and Egypt which are peculiar to them and different from anything European, as, to take one notable example, the god-like importance of their kings. For this he has no excuse ; for not only do some of his own sentences and many of his illustrations hint at this difference (his quotation, for instance, from Herodotus of the story of Croesus and Cyrus), but Professor Murray expressly begged him to do it :

> " What I want you to do is to take the Greeks at the level of the people around them and see how they differ. For example, the first thing that strikes one is that they use all their powers for a different purpose than most peoples : for intellectual and artistic things. No more enormous work here to glorify kings ; no private splendour, no luxury, but a wonderful output of art, poetry, philosophy, and—within limits—science. Compare them with Rome " (p. 216).

" See how they differ," " comparison " : that is indeed what is wanted.

Mr. Wells is further prevented from doing this necessary work of comparison by another " barrier set about his mind "—his desire to be broadminded, his peculiar view of history as a gradual development by which man has advanced (always towards something finer and larger) from his earliest origins to our own enlightened century : " that steady development of life towards a common

consciousness and a common will, which we have hitherto been tracing in this book" (p. 356). But broadmindedness is frequently the result of short sight. The short-sighted man, seeing only vague outlines, will think the shapes and colours of distant objects similar and one as good as another, when in reality they are different in shape and in value. Thus would Mr. Wells remove Greece and Rome from the high level above some other people, where many persons have placed them. Carthage becomes the equal of Rome: "it is now necessary to take up the history of the two great republics of the Western Mediterranean" (this is how Book V. opens); "two great peoples, both very necessary to the world's development" (p. 294); though in all the long history of Carthage there are only two things which have touched the imagination of mankind, the voyage of Hanno and the career of Hannibal.[1] Indeed all peoples are really equal for Mr. Wells:

> "A number of the citizens of Athens lived for the better part of a generation under conditions, which, in all ages, have disposed men to produce good and beautiful work; they were secure, they were free, and they had pride" (p. 210; it is difficult to see how the possession of pride can be called a condition under which men live; and the security of these citizens was distinctly shaky).
>
> "Given the opportunity all races are artistic."
>
> "Men found that though there were many gods, they were all very much alike" (p. 254).

Men only differ, in Mr. Wells' view, according to the period in which they lived, according as they are near or far from the twentieth century; though before then all alike "lived in a time of such darkness and narrowness

[1] It is noteworthy that Pyrrhus of Epirus by threatening Sicily, brought Carthage into alliance against him, because "Carthage could not afford to have a strong power established so close to her as Sicily" (p. 277). But when a modern historian writes that "a Carthaginian garrison on the Sicilian Straits would have been a dangerous menace to the peace of Italy," and that Rome was right to oppose it, he is "soaked with the fantastic political ideas of our time" (p. 289).

of outlook as makes our own time by comparison a time of dazzling illumination." Mr. Wells is obsessed (to use his own phrase) with this notion of the races of mankind struggling in darkness to attain to the light of the twentieth century. Phrases such as " to a modern mind this is almost unbelievable," " by our modern standards," " we know nowadays," are scattered throughout his pages. He has an interesting passage on the slow growth of the mechanism of intellectual life, and notes especially that it is curious that printing was not discovered by the ancients (pp. 251-3). But he much exaggerates the effect of the old system of publishing books by making manuscript copies. " These limitations enable us to understand why it was that Alexandria could at once achieve the most extraordinary intellectual triumphs and yet have little or no effect upon the course of politics or the lives and thoughts of people around her," because learning was not spread by the rapid process of printed books.[1] But the much greater intellectual triumphs of the fifth and fourth centuries had considerable effect on the lives and thoughts of contemporaries ; and there is no evidence to show that persons who wished to know of the development of thought and art were much hampered by the difficulties of publishing. It was an immense inconvenience, but not much of a hindrance. It is as wrong to suppose that there was but little reading before the invention of printing, as that before the invention of the steam locomotive no one travelled. Mr. Wells should have been warned by a wise note by Professor Myres : he writes, " it is difficult to understand how there could be much active retailing without small change " ; to

[1] Cf. pp. 134-5, where Mr. Wells divides the development of life into five periods : (1) Discontinuous consciousness (reptiles) ; (2) a tradition of experience (mammals) ; (3) verbal tradition (earliest man) ; (4) invention of writing ; (5) printing. As though there was as much difference in the intellectual life of the world between the last two of these periods as between the fourth and the third, or the third and the second.

which there is the note, " J. L. M. says this is the view of a Londoner. In a village or small town where everyone knows everyone, long credits are possible without barter. In Asia Minor there is much reckoning with quite imaginary money of account."

These comparisons of darkness with light are not always very accurate :

> " And another deficiency, very understandable to us nowadays, but quite beyond the scope of anyone then, was the absence of any general elementary political education " (p. 302).

Beyond the scope of Plato and Aristotle and their readers ? Sometimes they are misleading :

> " Pericles spent the war hoard of the allies upon the beautification of his city. This was an unrighteous thing to do by our modern standards " (p. 211).

But it was the contemporaries of Pericles, his political opponents, who made this one of the chief charges against his administration, that he used the gold of the allies to deck out the city like a vain woman, and was destroying the honour of Athens in Greece, as Mr. Wells will find in Plutarch. Sometimes such reasoning is merely comic : " Finally Alexander set aside ten thousand talents (a talent = £240) for a tomb. For those days this was an enormous sum " (p. 245). As if it were now a common custom, a very usual thing, to spend two and a half million pounds on the interment of a friend.

This picture of the older peoples struggling towards the light of our own day has some odd effects.

> " This extraordinary political growth [of Roman citizenship] was manifestly the precursor of all modern states of the western type. It is as interesting to the political student, therefore, as a carboniferous amphibian or an *archaeopteryx* to the student of zoological development. It is the primitive type of a now dominant order " (p. 283).

Thus is the majesty of the Empire reduced! And because of the cruelty and grossness that was a feature of Roman life, "if republican Rome was the first of modern self-governing national communities, she was certainly the 'Neanderthal' form of them." For it is one of Mr. Wells' curious theories that morality advances parallel with thought and the material side of civilization, and that primitive men are in all ways inferior to their successors. "The fears and jealousies of the squatting-place and the cave still bear their dark blossoms in our lives; we are not four hundred generations yet from the old Stone Age."

But a saner view of history suggests that it is not a story of mankind climbing one single hill (even up different sides of it) with ourselves high up, and all earlier peoples in darkness below left struggling up the same paths. Rather have the peoples of the earth climbed up their several hills, some higher than others (difficult as it may be to say which), all different; but the hills of Greece and Rome are among the highest; while we, climbing up our own, already perhaps higher than they, have the good fortune of being able to look across to their summits to learn something of their achievement, and receive light from those radiant peaks.

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Someone may say, granted that Mr. Wells is by nature unfitted for an appreciation of Greece, that his account is untrue, that he has taken no pains to discover facts or verify his opinions, still, if in an universal history there is but one such false account, if the rest of the story is good,[1] then the book was well worth writing and is to

[1] It is not for me to criticise the rest of this book, but I notice that Mr. Wells asserts that the Byzantine Empire maintained itself for nearly 1000 years in spite of "a series of inept rulers" (p. 350). Does Mr. Wells care nothing whether his statements are true or false?

See Mr. Belloc in the *Dublin Review* for May, and the *London Mercury* for November, 1920, for a criticism of other parts of the *Outline*.

be praised. Indeed it would be a memorable achievement. To see if this claim can be substantiated I will briefly examine his accounts of the conquest of Asia by Alexander and of the Roman Empire. Omitting all minor inaccuracies—for I have mentioned enough and more than enough—let us see whether he has grasped the significance and the importance of these two movements. If Mr. Wells has failed both to show the significance of the career of Alexander and to give a reasonable picture of the Romans, a people so different from the Greeks, as he has failed for them, then one will be forced to be in doubt about the truth of any part of his history.

What, then, is the significance of Alexander's conquest? It is this, that the old lands of the Persian king, Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, Syria, Egypt became Greek, that is to say, European, and remained so for very many centuries; the most easterly parts and Egypt for some nine centuries till they were absorbed by the Arabs, Asia Minor for some four centuries longer till its final conquest by the Ottoman Turks. For nearly fourteen hundred years, about as long as there have been English in England, Asia Minor was European in language and culture; and since the Roman conquest in the second century B.C. it had been politically European as well. Its culture was, it is true, tinged by the phantasies of the East, but it remained essentially European. Men like Lucian, Plotinus, Ptolemy the geographer, were all born far from the geographical boundaries of Europe; but they were as European as their contemporaries in Italy.

This Hellenization of Western Asia had one result of overwhelming importance. Christianity began in an Asiatic country and among a Semitic people. But to the north and south of Palestine was a Greek civilization in Syria and Egypt, and all were part of an united Empire with its capital in Italy. Palestine was in touch with no

civilization, no state that was non-European. When the earliest apostles began teaching beyond the borders of Palestine they found themselves in what was in effect a part of Europe. Quite naturally they preached to Europeans in a European language; quite naturally they passed on through Asia Minor to Greece, and from Greece to Rome. Alexandria, Antioch, Iconium, all the early centres of Christianity in Asia, except Jerusalem, were Greek cities. St. Paul wrote and spoke in Greek, and was a citizen of Rome. Christianity was therefore from the first a European, not an Asiatic religion, western in idea not eastern, despite its origin; and very soon its centres of authority were no longer in Asia, but established at Rome and at Constantinople. It is hardly possible to exaggerate the importance of this almost accidental result of Alexander's conquests, so vital to Europe and to the world. Mr. Wells gives two chapters to the story of Alexander and his successors, but does not mention it. He has many pages of discussion as to the relative merits of Philip and his son, and decides in favour of the former; he exaggerates the achievement of Hellenism at Alexandria and Pergamon (especially the latter); but this result of the careers of those two men, a result that would be unaffected by a discovery proving that Alexander was a great man but his father was not, and that is more important than the learning of Alexandria and the sculpture of Pergamon, Mr. Wells omits from his history. For him Alexander is only a portent of world order and world dominion, and his story that of "one futile commencement, one glorious shattered beginning of human unity."

So much for Alexander. What of Rome? One expected Mr. Wells to admire Rome (relatively to other ancient peoples, that is; not of course compared with ourselves). He dislikes small things, and rejoices at large things, those that grow larger and larger . . .; and Rome had a weakness for size—emperors building

"record" basilicas and baths, and the like. He likes order, efficiency, good engineering; all this the Romans had. He has a passion for world unity; and Rome certainly united most of the known world. He has a feeling for earlier empires; and praises the organization of the Persian Empire of Darius (p. 198).

If the empire of Alexander is a "glorious shattered beginning of human unity," surely the empire of Rome, which succeeded where the Greeks failed, should be at least equally glorious. But apparently not.

> "The idea of world dominion was taken up [after Alexander] by another great people, a people who for some centuries exhibited considerable political genius, the Romans" (p. 247).

This is the highest praise he gives them; and, to judge by later chapters, these centuries were not those that lie between, say 150 B.C. and 350 or 400 A.D., but those that are earlier than 200 B.C. I will select the salient passages which give Mr. Wells' verdict on the Empire, and the reader can judge of its value. I am not, I think, omitting anything important that Mr. Wells says in qualification of this verdict.

The title of the book, the fifth, which deals with Rome at once makes one pause: *The Rise and Collapse of the Roman Empire*, as though the Empire did nothing except rise and collapse. Yet even the picture which Mr. Wells gives us suggests long-drawn-out centuries of misery for millions of people before the barbarians came to end it for ever. But this is the story. There were "shrewder, nobler Roman senators of the great years of Rome, before the first Punic War overstrained her moral strength and began her degeneration." What a long time, though, that strength resisted the strain before it finally broke! In that war the Romans "wrecked their own slowly acquired political *morale* (pp. 283, 289). Carthage, we know, was as good and important a state

as Rome,[1] and the struggle between the two was "the most wasteful and disastrous series of wars that has ever darkened the history of mankind"—a truly remarkable judgment. But the victory of the Romans at sea "changed the course of the war and the fate of the world." The fate of the world! Yet the Roman Empire is a mere "incident in history." After the first Punic War

> "began that age-long hostility between the lands north and south of the Mediterranean which lasts down to our own day, the conflict of the Semiticized Berber and the Aryanized South European, in spite of the fact that these two divisions of Mediterranean man have so much in common. Henceforth they took different sides in religion, in language, in costume and culture" (pp. 292-3).

It would be difficult to collect a greater amount of error into so short a sentence. The truth is quite the contrary. *Before* the defeat of Carthage by Rome there had been age-long hostility between the Greeks of Sicily and the Carthaginians of Africa from almost the beginning of their respective settlements; *after* it the north and south of the Mediterranean took the same side in religion, in language, in costume and culture, for many centuries (interrupted only by the invasion of the Vandals), till the Arab conquest. Mr. Wells does not seem to have heard of any Roman colonization of Africa, for he writes elsewhere: "she had destroyed and looted Carthage and so had no foothold for extension into Africa" (p. 315). Yet

[1] Mr. Wells has sometimes a naïve way of showing the equal value of these two states. After the first Punic war "the territories of Carthage seethed with violent disorder. . . . We read of horrible cruelties in the suppression of these troubles by Hamilcar, the Carthaginian general; of men being crucified by the thousand. . . .The 'peace of Italy' was scarcely happier. The Gauls rose and marched south; they were defeated, and 40,000 of them killed at Telamon." The defeat of a barbarian invader seems to appear to Mr. Wells much the same thing as mutiny within the state, and thousands crucified to suppress it.

Tunis and Algeria were among the most flourishing provinces of the Empire, as is being daily more and more amply demonstrated since France resumed the work of Rome and brought North Africa once more within the European scheme.[1] Mr. Wells also thinks that the Romans plundered and destroyed Asia Minor and Babylonia, and so weakened and restored to barbarism the far wider conquests of Hellenic civilization. But it was due to Rome that Asia Minor remained Greek till 1100 A.D.

Mr. Wells can afford space to describe the cruel career and miserable end of Sulla, but "we cannot relate in any detail how Julius Caesar accumulated reputation in the west, by conquering Gaul, defeating the German tribes upon the Rhine, and pushing a punitive raid across the Straits of Dover into Britain." He does not relate it at all, and this bare mention, you note, is in connection, not with the Roman civilization of Gaul, but with the "reputation" of Caesar. Already, by the way, in the middle of the first century, Rome "lay like a lamb in the embrace of this great crescent of outer barbarians" which stretched from the Rhine to the Black Sea, just as the second Babylonian Empire had once lain like a lamb in the embrace of the Median power (p. 314). It was fortunate for Rome that the barbarians managed to stave off their hunger for five hundred years.

Rome "utterly and disastrously failed" (p. 321), chiefly, I suppose, because she had no unity, moral or intellectual:

> "There was no one who realized the gravity of her failure to develop any intellectual imagination to hold her empire together, any general education in common ideas that would make men fight and work for the empire as men will fight and work for a dear possession. But the

[1] "There is no other portion of the world Rome governed, not even Southern Gaul, where her genius is more apparent. In that short interval of daylight Rome did more than had Carthage in seven hundred years, and more than was Islam to do in seven hundred more."—H. Belloc, *Esto Perpetua*.

rulers of Rome did not want their citizens to fight for anything in any spirit at all " (p. 334).

" In view of these obvious negligences, it is no wonder that the Romans disregarded that more subtle thing, the soul of the empire, altogether, and made no effort to teach or train or win its common people into any conscious participation of its life " (pp. 338-9).

Civis Romanus sum. " I appeal unto Caesar." Did Roman citizenship mean nothing to its possessor ? Did the idea never touch the imagination ? No wonder Mr. Wells quite misunderstands the position of a man of barbarian descent who might be a Roman general (p. 347).

Things were pretty bad for the Roman citizen, even when Roman civilization was at its zenith (from 27 B.C. to 180 A.D.) :

" The world, it is evident, was not progressing during these two centuries of Roman prosperity. But was it happy in its stagnation ? There are signs of a very unmistakable sort that the great mass of human beings in the empire, a mass numbering something between a hundred and a hundred and fifty millions, was not happy, was probably very acutely miserable, beneath its outward magnificence. . . . Life for the great majority . . . must have been laborious, tedious, and lacking in interest and freedom to a degree that a modern mind can scarcely imagine " (p. 336).

And what are these signs ? Mr. Wells mentions three in particular : (1) the people did not resist the barbarian invaders—indeed great numbers probably joined them—like the Britons in this country, I suppose ; (2) they refused to have children, because there was no security—where did Mr. Wells learn this ? and (3) new religious movements spread rapidly. So there you have it.

" We have already shown reasons for our statement that the Roman imperial system was a very unsound political growth indeed. It is absurd to write of its statecraft ; it had none. At its best it had a bureaucratic administration which kept the peace of the world for a time and failed altogether to secure it " (p. 337).

So the barbarian invasions on the whole did a good thing. The population welcomed them, would have welcomed any change from the caprices, the lust and the cruelty of the Roman officials. " Manifestly, the Vandals came in as a positive relief to such a system " (p. 348). There is no doubt, it is manifest. Mr. Wells here prints a note by Mr. Barker, who regards this view of the end of the empire (quite rightly) as the pro-Teutonic view of the German historians. But as Mr. Wells gives no account of the way the Empire was run, no description, for instance, of the life of a man like Pliny the Younger, the reader will hardly observe the note and will certainly not be able to give it the attention it deserves.

For, honestly, that is all Mr. Wells gives the unfortunate reader, who will learn nothing from him about Roman life and character (Mr. Wells might, for instance, have mentioned that after the battle of Cannae, where Hannibal " was assailed by a vastly superior Roman force under Varro, and destroyed it utterly " (p. 295), the Senate passed a resolution thanking Varro for " not having despaired of the Republic "), nothing even about the bureaucracy, nor of Roman art and literature—except two fantastic judgments on Virgil and Lucretius, the former already quoted, the latter putting Lucretius on a level with Newton or Pasteur—nothing about their architecture or their engineering, their roads, their bridges, their aqueducts. He will get no light on the military system, no explanation of the long neglect of the barbarians to eat their lamb. He will find nothing but rhetorical denunciation, based on arbitrary or untrue assertions.

Yet, oddly enough, it was unfortunate both for herself and for Europe, that Germany was not included in this poor mockery of an empire. The intention attributed to Caesar of systematically conquering and civilizing Europe as far as the Baltic and the Dnieper is described as " this wise and magnificent project " (p. 316) ; and Augustus is blamed for fixing the European boundaries of the

Empire along the Rhine and the Danube, " so leaving Germany, which is the necessary backbone of a safe and prosperous Europe, to barbarism " (p. 326).

Two points I will mention especially. Mr. Wells mentions the will of Attalus, Greek king of Pergamon, leaving his country to be administered by Rome,

> " one of the most extraordinary incidents in history. . . . It is difficult for us to understand this bequest. . . The natural consequence of such a will was to provoke a violent scramble among the senatorial gangs and a dispute between them and the people for the spoils of the new acquisition. Practically, Attalus handed over his country to be looted " (p. 310).

The reader of this history will certainly find it difficult to understand. Mr. Wells suggests a forgery, only to be contradicted by Professor Myres and Mr. Barker in a footnote. Moreover, " this bequest, astonishing in itself, had the still more astonishing result of producing imitations in other quarters," Cyrenaica, Egypt, and Bithynia. Might not Mr. Wells have paused for a moment to try and find an explanation, to consider whether after all his account of Rome might be false ? whether indeed there was any reason for believing it to be true ? He might have thought that there was some intelligence in men who have admired Rome, from Greeks—never much given to admiring foreigners—like Polybius, Dionysius and Plutarch, throughout the ages to men of our day.

The second point is this. Mr. Wells writes :

> " Western writers are apt, through their patriotic predispositions, to overestimate the organization, civilising work, and security of the absolute monarchy that established itself in Rome after the accession of Augustus Caesar. From it we derive the political traditions of Britain, France, Spain, Germany, and Italy, and these countries loom big in the perspectives of European writers. . . . The reputation of Rome has flourished through the prosperity of her heirs. The tradition of Rome is greater than its reality " (pp. 325-6).

A man who knew nothing of the history of Rome but three facts, that the Empire had once comprised France, Spain and Italy, that barbarians had invaded these countries, entirely broken up the Roman rule and settled there, and that, nevertheless, the language, the traditions, and the institutions of these three countries were entirely Latin, and different from those of the countries beyond the boundaries, would know that Mr. Wells' account of that empire, with its story of unwilling and miserable subjects welcoming the invader, must be inadequate and false ; just as clearly as all will know that there may be an explanation of the conduct of Attalus in bequeathing his kingdom to Rome, and that Mr. Wells has not given it nor sought to find it. The fact that Mr. Wells couples Germany with France, Italy, Spain and England, as though equally with them it shared in the Roman tradition, shows how he himself fails to understand the Empire.

Rhetorical all this is, and without even the grace of a rhetorical style ; indeed it is a flat and undistinguished style, with no edge to it, no decision, and relieved only by an affected simplicity such as " statue of a great lady, the Princess Nefert, who lived nearly six thousand years ago," and " later on, as we shall tell, there was born a prophet of unprecedented power, Jesus, whose followers founded the great universal religion of Christianity," or by a childish vigour, as in " the Greeks were thoroughly annoyed by this stealing of women," " Scipio . . . was made consul, and bundled off to Africa to save his precious country," " the senatorial gang," " in the same year the Roman Senate and Equestrians also *murdered* another great city that seemed to limit their trade monopolies, Corinth " (it sounds like Mr. George Grossmith's song, " So I *murdered* him last Tuesday "). There is no inquiry in the work, no judgment. Milhaud, in the Conclusion of his *Philosophes-Géomètres de la Grèce,* describes thus the nature of scientific work in a historian ;

the reader will see how distant from it is Mr. Wells' book :

> " Le philologue ou l'historien ont fait œuvre de savants parce qu'ils ont poursuivi la vérité, c'est-à-dire parce qu'ils ont fait effort pour écarter toute circonstance accidentelle, contingente, qui aurait pu mettre leur intelligence dans un état d'exception, parce qu'ils ont laissé de côté le respect que pouvait leur inspirer telle ou telle autorité, parce qu'ils ont imposé silence à leurs sentiments personnels, à leurs désirs de proclamer telle vérité plutôt que telle autre, et qu'enfin ils n'ont puisé leurs raisons que dans un ordre de faits et d'idées tellement normaux que tout homme, dont l'entendement sera lui-même normal et sain, sera convaincu naturellement par leur simple exposé."

Starting with a preconceived idea which he is anxious to proclaim, careless of the truth, in detail as in general, slovenly in expression, incapable of perceiving the general lines of his story, blind to important things and ready with the irrelevant, indifferent to the qualities that separate race from race, and the achievements of one people from those of another, and possessed with a truly amazing confidence in the ease of the task he has undertaken and his own ability to cope with it, Mr. Wells has all the defects of which a historian should be free, particularly one who would write, for the general public, an outline of the story of mankind.

It is a commonplace among historians that work conceived in the scientific spirit, of which Greece had given so many and such illustrious examples, almost ceased to be produced within a hundred years of the reign of Alexander, and was succeeded by work of a different character and an inferior quality. Of that spirit, with its love of knowledge for its own sake, its impartial search after truth, its power of exact reasoning, we too have had our share. But it may not last for ever ; and perhaps the appearance and immediate popularity of Mr. Wells' rhetorical *History* may be a sign of its incipient decay.

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